

Zubrycki sheds light on 1985 strike

FRIENDS AND ENEMIES (PG) at Electric Shadows in the Playhouse

I APPROACHED Tom Zubrycki's documentary of the 1985 Queensland electricity linesmen's strike with a measure of caution, wondering if it was going to be a polemic about the goodness of the working man and his organisations and an anti-conservative diatribe.

Having seen it in the privacy of my living room, I am now sorry I didn't see it at the preview screening for local Labor Party people to which I was invited. The feedback would, I suspect, have been interesting. For Zubrycki has assembled an objective chronicle with the full cooperation of both sides of the argument.

It raises a great number of questions and invites the film-goer to provide his or her own answers. These coalesce into one overriding question — who comes out of the affair with credit? The answer is, not the ETU, not the TLC, not the ACTU, not the ALP opposition in Queensland or Government in Canberra, not the Queensland Government and, in particular, the Minister for Labour, Mr Vince Lester. Only the group of

wives of the strikers emerges from the film with any dignity or worth.

Friends And Enemies is a film of issues that go to the core of our social and economic and political and intellectual and industrial institutions. It is not crucial to the story or the film that Joh governs the Sunshine State with a minority Government put there by a biased electoral system. Instead, consider the observation by one of the rank and file that the unions in Queensland make sure the president of the TLC is a weak personality susceptible to pressure. Consider the sight of grown men running around like kids playing armies and the bureaucratisation of the TLC to the point that the wives' group cannot even get in to see its leadership because they are in conference.

Consider Simon Crean's comment that "you" blokes are in trouble but that "we" have to do something about it. This is divisiveness of a high order, especially in Queensland, where they have always done things differently and will continue to do so long after Joh is only a memory. More than that, it is evidence of one of the least-defensible features of unionism in this country —

the employment of professional union officials who are not eligible on craft or trade grounds to be rank-and-file members of the unions they administer.

On the other side of the coin, *Friends And Enemies* lets Vince Lester commit a beautiful hatchet-job on himself. Lester is a baker who, like his loaves, rose in the world. A man of sublime human foolishness yet with a cunning sensitivity for the guts of a political issue according to his own lights. A man who thinks the worst thing about the economic blockade of the State is that flowers will not be available from interstate to commemorate Mother's Day and who tells the faithful that the reason for the camera following him so closely is that Zubrycki is doing a documentary about him. And who in the film digs a hole with his mouth and before our eyes metaphorically buries himself in it.

These form only sampler of what the film says. Zubrycki has taken his camera and sound gear to the heart of both sides of the conflict and recorded it dispassionately. The result is a rivetting piece of cinema.

Friends and Enemies

Friends and Enemies: a review/polemic

BY CHRIS
NASH



In Australia, August 1987, to ask where one might look for the seeds of a politically radical cinema is to present oneself as an irrelevance, either a callow youth or worse still, an ageing veteran wistful for campaigns long gone and never to be repeated.

Among workers in the cultural sphere, the achievement of an "historic third term" by the Labor Party has been met by a confused quiet: the sigh of relief that Howard, Bjelke-Petersen and their barbarian hordes have been turned aside has been stifled into numbed silence by the recall of this government's record in office. The appointment of John Brown and Graham Richardson as ministers responsible for the arts has only deepened the apprehension.

The dead hand of Menzies writes this government's policies: safeguard the hip pocket of the swinging middleclass voter, justify everything by an appeal to economic development and the goal of future prosperity, incorporate the major interest groups into a rigid consensus, and marginalise into obscurity any dissenting voices. In the sphere of culture, harness your image to spectator sports, encourage a populist consumerism, and look overseas for quality and inspiration.

Only the location of the imperial throne has changed. Instead of Royal visits in election years, we now have the US Secretaries of State and Defence come to pose for photo sessions with our leaders.

And in a re-run of the Menzies years the reaction of cultural activists is familiar: either look for cover and defend your hole as best you can, or else look overseas for a more stimulating environment.

In the context of this demoralising greyness, to look for any stirrings of a radical cinema is perhaps to pose too difficult a question. The very meaning of the term has been so abused by the fashions in manifestos over the last two decades that as a currency for critical exchange it is no longer negotiable. It will have to be minted anew in the crucible of social action before it regains any recognised value.

But if now in Australia it isn't possible to ask about a radical cinema, it is absolutely imperative that we ask what is a politically pertinent cinema.

Part of the answer at least is clear: it is a cinema that deals with the effects of an entrenched social democratic government on the left in this country. You would think that would be the easy part to answer, and to achieve. The much more fraught question is: how to deal with it? But only two films recently have even broached the subject of Labor in power — *Democracy* and *Friends and Enemies*. Unfortunately I was away during *Democracy*'s season in Sydney, so my comments are restricted to Tom Zubrycki's *Friends and Enemies*.

In February, 1985, over one thousand electrical workers went on strike against the introduction of contractors into the South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQUEB). The Queensland Premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, called a State of Emergency and sacked the workers. Soon after, he rushed through parliament some of the harshest anti-

union legislation seen in this country for over half a century.

Two years later, in 1987, he extended this legislation to cover most other industries. Strikes are now illegal in any industry that exports goods or services out of Queensland.

While the actions of the Queensland Government are the occasion of the conflict that is the subject of the film, they have already been completed by the time the film starts. Dramatically, they form the backdrop for the real subject matter: the conflict between the rank and file strike committee and the leadership of their own union, the Queensland Trades and Labour Council, the ACTU and by implication, the Hawke Labor Government.

It is the backdrop that is sketched in colourful detail through the antics of the Minister for Industrial Relations, Vince Lester. Lester is a buffoon, pompous beyond the point of self parody. While frog marching his partner through a waltz at a debutante's ball in the backblocks of Queensland, he tells her the cameras are present because "they're making a film about me".

The deb's ball is one of the highlights of *Friends and Enemies*. I can't recall any other film or television footage that so perfectly catches the fifties' frumpiness and self satisfied provincialism that is the backbone of rural conservatism. This is the National Party's home turf. Senator Flo Bjelke-Petersen admonishes the young debs, replete with bouquets and little girls to hold their hands, to keep themselves beautiful on the inside as well as the outside.

It is the same sense of dowdy propriety and ignorant self righteousness that has sustained British imperialism on its frontiers around the world. Whether it be in Ian Smith's Rhodesia, Piggy Muldoon's New Zealand or Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland. Senator Flo and Vince Lester know their audience, and they work them like they're kneading dough.

But quaint and colourful as these images are, they are really only the backdrop for the central dramatic tension in the film. The Nationals knew they'd won the dispute as soon as the TLC called off its bans and turned the lights back on in Queensland. Joh and Lester make periodic appearances throughout the rest of the film, but only to say the same thing over and over, claiming victory and refusing to negotiate.

Lost before it begins

The central dramatic conflict in *Friends and Enemies* is between the rank and file strike committee and the union officials above them, extending from their own union, the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) through the TLC to the ACTU. As Bernie Neville, an outspoken and controversial leader of the strike committee puts it in the early minutes of the film: "Six weeks ago the strike could have been won had the blackouts continued. We had the government beaten. Now we're fighting on all fronts."

The importance of the film's subject matter is clear. In the context of a powerful if sometimes disorganised offensive by the forces of the Right — old

and new, with rhetoric borrowed and mouldy blue — the response by the forces of the Left is crucial. It is their response that will determine how much ground is lost before a counter offensive can be mounted. As everyone knows, the response by progressive forces in this country has been woeful: confused, compromised and riddled with self doubt. While poverty spreads through the suburbs, while blacks are routinely found dead in police cells, while the public health system collapses, while property developers amass fortunes overnight and Australia continues to be the most servile vassal of the US, the leaders of discredited Left organisations pass memos backwards and forwards amongst each other looking for the lowest common denominator for an ineffectual unity.

So the need for a film that explores the relations between institutions and people on the Left is overwhelming. Credit is due to Tom Zubrycki for recognising the significance of the subject matter. With few colleagues amongst established filmmakers he continues to make films about the unfashionable issues of workers' struggles.

The reason such topics are unfashionable is well known: the question of film form. Almost invariably documentaries about industrial struggles adopt a tried and true formula modelled on such classics as *Harlan County*. The occasion of the film is a strike, the workers are cast in heroic mould in their struggle with both employers and union bosses, shoulder-mounted camera follows the action, keeping it centre frame, and the narrative unfolds chronologically to the resolution of the strike, at which point the story finishes.

Both the strength and weaknesses of *Friends and Enemies* flow from the director's attempt to use this structure at the same time as he recognises its inadequacies. It doesn't work because the unfolding battle of the strike is supposed to be the dramatic dynamic of the film, but the strike was lost almost as soon as filming started. As soon as the combined power unions stopped the blackouts at the behest of the TLC and the ACTU, the battle was over.

It's confusing

The confusing thing for the audience is that we're never told this. The point of view is with the strike committee, who refuse to believe they have lost the struggle. Indeed the eventual resolution of the film's narrative comes when the strikers' wives and mothers demand that the union officials tell the line workers that the battle is over. By accepting the strike committee's view of the fight, the film confuses the audience, who know that their side is fast unravelling, but can't pinpoint the key stages in the process.

Because the film adopts a chronological structure centred on the thoughts and actions of the rank and file activists, the moment of revelation is never acknowledged. It has already passed, but we weren't told because we have identified it at the time would have subverted the structure for the rest of the film. So the audience is left wondering.

The major portion of the film is a chronological account of how the strikers were beaten into the ground. It depicts the various battlegrounds such as the demonstrations and confrontations with police, the flying pickets, the harassment of scabs, and the meetings of the strike committee as they slowly come to realise their union officials, the TLC and the ACTU will not support them in any effective action. But at the same time, no one will

acknowledge to the sacked line workers, or to the audience, that the dispute has been lost, even though Bjelke-Petersen and Lester claim it confidently on the media.

The great strength of Zubrycki's approach is that he gets the camera into situations where subterfuge can't be maintained. That in itself undermines the classic formula of strike films. For these activists aren't "working class heroes". They're confused, increasingly demoralised and not always likeable. As Bernie Neville's wife says to him, he has taken the tactics of their enemies and used them as his own. The increasingly frustrated line workers harass, intimidate and manipulate both opponents and each other — all very understandable in the context of their struggle but not the stuff to let you idealise them. It's a salutary dose of realism that's in such short supply both among political documentary makers as well as among the broader Left.

No heroes — or heroines

This lack of suitable heroes about whom the narrative can be structured tempts the director to idealise the role played by the women in the fight. But though they are personable and easily admired, and though they shoulder the burden of closing off the narrative, their structural role in the dispute is never central enough to sustain heroic status, which is a relief. Zubrycki resists the temptation to repeat *Kemira* and close off the story of a lost battle by transmuting the political issues into personal ones. The political issues of the eighties are far too complicated and extensive to be encapsulated into the experiences of individuals, no matter how central to a process they may be.

The other enduring image of the film is that of ACTU President Simon Crean resting his bulging bottom against a desk as he explains to the irate strike committee how negotiations six months after the fight was lost are the best tactic to use, though sorry fellas, we'll only be talking about one hundred and twenty jobs for the seven hundred and fifty line workers still on strike. Unfortunately the film ran out at the crucial moment, but the anger and despair in the men's voices is more than sufficient to convey the depths of their sense of betrayal.

Crean's use of reasoning doubletalk to disguise the realities of their situation and the motivations behind the ACTU position underline the central revelation of *Friends and Enemies* — that in the era of social democratic consensus, words and images are used to disguise the actual processes of power from those who might want to change those processes.

In that sense *Friends and Enemies* can be seen as a significant film in the development of contemporary political documentary. Its strengths are that it identifies some of the significant political processes of our time and brings the camera to bear on them. Its weaknesses highlight the inadequacies of traditional forms of political documentary, and identify the urgent need for documentary filmmakers to address questions of form from the vantage point of their political awareness.

If ever there were a need for a new path in political cinema it is now, in Australia in 1987. Likewise there is a need to take the offensive in discussion over form from those who airily dismiss any value in debates over realism in cinema. The evident banality of the "form for form's sake" position can't justify political filmmakers sticking to their own comfortable nostrums about structure. The responsibility to chart the new directions lies with them.

Made In Argentina (ARGENTINE-COLOR)

A Juan José Jusid Cine production, distributed in Argentina by Mundial Films and worldwide by Progress Communications (U.S.). Directed by Jusid. Stars Luis Brandoni, Marta Bianchi, Leonor Manso, Patricia Contreras. Screenplay, Nelly Fernández Tiscornia, based on her play "Made In Lanús," based in turn on her tv play "Pais" ("Country"); camera (color), Hugo Colace; editor, Juan Carlos Maclas; music, Emilio Kauderer; art direction, Luis Pedreira; costumes, Pepe Uria. Reviewed at the Vigo screening room, Buenos Aires, May 5, 1987. (Rating in Argentina: forbidden for under 13.) Running time: 86 MINS.

Oswaldo Luis Brandoni
Mabel Marta Bianchi
Yoli Leonor Manso
Negro Patricia Contreras

Also with: Alberto Busaid, Hugo Arana, Jorge Rivera López, Mario Luciano, Gabriela Flores, Alejo García Pintos, Paula Natalicio, Debbie Better, Frank Vincent.

Buenos Aires — Already committed to festival presentations in Montreal and Moscow, this drama plays out situations familiar to many Argentines, and which undoubtedly find echoes in other parts of the world. Plot concerns various questions related to the abandonment of one's country to seek a better or at least safer life abroad.

Oswaldo and Mabel, one of the two couples forming the principal foursome in this story, have left Argentina as victims of political persecution under the military juntas, and have lived in New York for 10 years. After a scene-setter filmed in Gotham, they return to Buenos Aires for the first time, under the current democracy, to meet their family, specifically Yoli and El Negro. Though Oswaldo and Mabel's exile has been political, several of the points raised in their temporary homcoming also apply to economic exile. Film could find an echo all over the Americas, where many are immigrants or descendants of recent immigrants, and in other situations worldwide where exile, emigration and immigration are topical.

Story advances mainly through a series of conversations in which bitterness wells up to varying extents, not only between the two couples, but also within each of them.

In this fictional situation with many real-life counterparts, when Oswaldo and Mabel ran into the political trouble (for opposing the military government) which forced their exile, many of their acquaintances and even relatives refused their help and pretended not to know them. A decade later, Oswaldo is tempted to forgive and return to his country for good; for his wife, "they are all dead," as far as she is concerned, and she was opposed to event returning to Argentina for a visit.

In the other couple, while El Negro dreams of leaving for the U.S. to improve the lot which has fallen to him in the Buenos Aires blue-collar suburb of Lanús, his wife Yoli favors struggling right there where their roots are.

Main characteristic of the film is a highly emotional tone, handled well. Analysis of the subject matter is good as far as it goes. The filmmakers were particularly interested in showing the potential for reconciliation in Argentine society. At some points in the development of the story, the latter appears to verge on a more vitriolic series of accusations and counter-accusations, particularly vis-a-vis third parties, but the deeper delving is avoided.

Only a line or two of dialog, for instance, deals with the once widespread feeling here that those who were persecuted were indeed ipso facto subversives. Also, not only do many who left the country accuse those who stayed of lack of support during their last days here, but many who stayed accuse those who

left of having had an easy life abroad while they remained to face the hard times at home. More about this could have been aired in the present work to make its overview more complete. Still, film offers a very effective treatment of the area into which it delves: the pangs of separation, the mixed emotions of some reunions, the whys and wherefores of leaving and of returning.

The soundtrack offers some nifty blending of tango and pop music. However, it might profitably do without an end-song which unsubtly drums in the moral of the story after it has already been made quite clear. —Olas.

Herencia de Valientes (Legacy Of The Brave) (MEXICAN-COLOR)

A Pelliculas Mexicanas release of a Producciones Hermanos Tamez production. Executive producer, Hugo Tamez. Produced by Orlando Tamez, Guadalupe Viuda de Tamez. Directed by Fernando Durán. Stars Sergio Goyri, Edgardo Gazcón. Screenplay, Carlos Valdemar, based on an idea by Arnulfo Benavides; camera (color), Agustín Lara; editor, Enrique Murillo; music, Diego Herrera, with appearance of the group Los Montañeses de Monterrey. Reviewed at Hollywood Twin theater 2, N.Y., June 5, 1987. Running time: 85 MINS.

Marcos Sergio Goyri
Sosteras Edgardo Gazcón
Daniela Patsy
Don Imperio Roberto Cañedo

Also with: Fernando Almada, Gregorio Casal, Antonio Zubiaga, Carlos Cardán, Jorge Victoria, Guillermo Lagunes, Clarissa Ahuet, Jorge Noble, Sergio Sánchez, Javier García, Jorge Feñán, Nena Delgado, Chelito, Isaura Espinoza.

Fernando Durán's "Herencia de Valientes" (Legacy Of The Brave) is a tenuous sequel to the Mexican genre pic "Todos Eran Valientes" (They Were All Brave), starring Fernando Almada and Gregorio Casal. A few moments from the earlier film are shown in slow motion and on b&w stock during the opening credits to give reference and show passage of time. These scenes also explain screen credits given to Almada and Casal.

A few grudges from the first revenge pic are carried over to clutter up the plot here. The characters give them lip service and then find new grievances.

Plot concerns a robbery where the daughter of an important politician is taken hostage. She (Patsy) is also the cousin of pic's heroes, Marcos (Sergio Goyri) and Sosteras (Edgardo Gazcón), who work independently of the police to free her.

Film follows a strict 1-2-3 chronology with few surprises; even the violent shoot-outs lack excitement. Tech credits and acting are routine. —Lent.

Mi General (My General) (SPANISH-COLOR)

A Figaro Films production. Executive producer, Antoni Maria C. Bonquer. Directed by Jaime de Armiñán. Screenplay, Armiñán, Fernando Fernán-Gómez, Manuel Pillares; camera (ApfA color), Teo Escamilla; editor, José Luis Mateasanz; music, Vainica Doble; sound, Jonn Quilis; sets, Félix Murcia. Features Fernando Rey, Fernando Fernán-Gómez, Héctor Alterio, José Luis López Vázquez, Mónica Randall Rafael Alonso, Amparo Baró, Alvaro de Luna, Alfredo Luchetti, Joaquín Kremel, Juanjo Puigcorbe. Reviewed at Cine Palacio de la Música, Madrid, May 27, 1987. Running time: 107 MINS.

Madrid — A group of Spanish generals, up for a special training course to initiate them into the secrets of modern warfare, comes in for plenty of good-natured ribbing in this comedy by Jaime Armiñán. (Item will be officially repping Spain at the upcoming Montreal fest.) The jesting and droll situations generate a good many laughs, but a third of the way through, pic

Nightmare At Shadow Woods (COLOR)

Trite slasher flick.

An FCG (Film Concept Group) release of a Marianne Kanter production. Executive producer J. W. Stanley. Produced by Kanter. Directed by John W. Grissmer. Screenplay, Richard Iamden; camera (CFI color), Richard F. Brooks; editor, Michael R. Miller; music, Richard Einhorn; production design, Jim Rule; special effects coordinator, Ed French; casting, Amanda Moore. Reviewed at Metro Northwest theater, Detroit, June 1, 1987. (MPAA Rating: R). Running time: 84 MINS.

Maddy Louise Lasser
Todd/Terry Mark Soper
Dr. Bertram Marianne Kanter
Karen Julie Gordon
Julie Jayne Benzen
Brad William Fuller

Detroit — A hackneyed script, wooden acting and trite plot all conspire to turn "Nightmare At Shadow Woods" into just another jiggling ten slasher movie whose box-office life likely will be as short-lived as its cast.

But some heavy-handed humor — particularly a campy performance by Louise Lasser — mixed with buckets of blood may provide this three-year-old slash-and-splash movie only now getting a theatrical run with a healthy afterlife in the undiscriminating homevid market. It was previously titled "Complex," "Slasher" and "Blood Rage."

As plots go, we've all been here before.

Terry Simmons is the evil twin who sneaks out of his mother's car at a Jacksonville, Fla., drive-in with shy brother Todd and slits someone's throat. Before anyone can find him, Terry wipes blood on his brother's face and thrusts a hatchet in his hand.

Incredulous at the gory scene, Todd remains mute and is carted off to a hospital for the criminally insane.

Ten years pass, and at a Thanksgiving dinner during which Lasser announces she and her boyfriend plan to wed, she gets a phone call that Todd has escaped.

That's cheery news to Terry, who's been a model son. Todd's escape means he can start killing again, which he does with great dispatch. No sooner has everyone finished dessert and Terry grabs a machete and gets cracking, slicing his way through his mother's boyfriend, his school chums, his Florida neighbors and his own girlfriend.

The audience is always three scenes ahead of the picture.

Todd/Terry's homicidal maniac listlessly walks around his Jacksonville apartment complex. Of course we know he's sick because at one point he licks his blood-spattered shirt and mutters: "Boy, that's not cranberry sauce."

No one seems to notice he's off, however. Indeed, everyone is slow on the uptake in this film.

For example, Lasser's boyfriend's last words as he turns to see Todd standing before him with a machete are, "Well, look what the cat dragged in."

Only Lasser, experienced enough to realize the anemic script can only be played for laughs, has any screen presence as the mother who, despite being surrounded by murder and mayhem, remembers to tell her son to wear a sweater outside — "The blue one."

By the time Todd and Terry meet for an anticlimactic face-off, Lasser has realized Todd's no sweetie. Only now it's too late. Just about everyone in the movie is dead, and the audience is too bored to care. —Advo.

Sydney Fest Reviews

Friends And Enemies (AUSTRALIAN-DOCU-COLOR)

A Jotz production, with the assistance of the Documentary Fellowship Scheme of the Australian Film Commission. Written, produced and directed by Tom Zubrycki. Camera (color), Fabio Cavadini, Larry Zetlin; editor, Les McLaren; sound, Kieran Knowe; music, Paul Charler. Reviewed at Sydney Film Festival, June 6, 1987. Running time: 89 MINS.

Sydney — Three years ago, Tom Zubrycki made a remarkable feature docu, "Kemira - Diary Of A Strike," which covered a coal miners' strike in a provincial Australian city, and the ultimate defeat of the miners. Now, working with a Film Commission Documentary Fellowship grant, he's back with "Friends And Enemies," which deals with another strike, this time by electricity workers in the state of Queensland, that ended in defeat for the strikers.

Setting the scene via tv news programs and interviews, Zubrycki lucidly establishes the conflict. The electricity workers waged a fight against the ultra-conservative Queensland government when, in the wake of the 1984 recession, the authorities tried to cut costs by employing private contractors in the industry. Battle lines are drawn between the strikers and their supportive families on the one hand, and Queensland Labor Minister Vince Lester on the other. Lester, who looks remarkably like evangelist Jerry Falwell, apparently thought Zubrycki and his crew were shooting a favorable pic about him, because he shamelessly hugs the camera whenever possible, especially in a bizarre scene where he visits a school and tells some tiny children it doesn't matter if they're not brainy ("I wasn't") as long as they work hard, or again when he attends an incredibly old-fashioned deb's ball in a small country town and cheerfully dances the night away.

As for the strikers, they're a feisty lot who are gradually betrayed by their own union (which seeks inevitable compromises) and by the Labor Party machine. Its their wives and families who react most strongly to the final defeat, with at least two of the women emerging as stars of the film with their infectiously grim humor and sensible, forthright approach to the increasingly difficult situation.

End titles remind Australians that the defeat of the electrical unions in Queensland led to the resurgence of the so-called New Right, and Zubrycki's film will be much appreciated by unionists and their supporters though not, perhaps, by the Labor Party, which is supposedly pro-union. The complex issues are spelled out clearly, and the pic should be received well at overseas fests, especially those highlighting docu.

Only quibble is that, on a couple of occasions, Zubrycki's camera obviously missed catching a key moment though sound tapes kept running. These gaps are covered with rather obvious reaction shots. Also, the superb opening sequence, in which, during an annual parade of war vets, an elderly man solemnly removes his medals and tries to hand them to the Governor as a protest "against tyranny" (he's promptly arrested by police), is never referred to again; we'd like to have heard more about what happened to this particular character.

Nonetheless, these are minor quibbles. "Friends And Enemies" is a

strong, gutsy, uncompromising film, like the strikers whose struggle it celebrates. —Strat.

Wielki Bieg (The Big Race) (POLISH-COLOR)

A Film Unit X-Politej Perspektywa Unit production. Directed by Jerzy Domaradzki. Screenplay, Feliks Falk; camera (color), Ryszard Leniewski; editor, M. Garlicka; music, Jerzy Matula. Reviewed at Sydney Film Festival, June 7, 1987. Running time: 102 MINS.

Stefan Budny Tadeusz Bradecki
Radek Stolar Jaroslaw Kopaczewski
Party Chairman Leon Niemczyk
Wrzesien Krzysztof Piczynski
Janek Druziarek Tadeusz Chudek
Kazimierz Sosna Tomasz Dudek
Fasyn Czesary Harasimowicz

Sydney — The Sydney fest scored a coup in obtaining permission to screen this long-shelved (since 1981) Polish pic. "The Big Race" is a very powerful attack on Polish Communist Party officials during the Stalinist era (film is set in 1952), but also works very effectively as a suspense drama, thanks to Feliks Falk's superb screenplay and the taut direction of Jerzy Domaradzki.

Film is structured around a "Peace Run," staged as a shameless piece of anti-U.S. propaganda. Idea is that a couple of hundred loyal Party members take off on a 3-day marathon for peace, the winner to be presented with a shiny new motorbike by the country's president. Chief organizer of the run is a ruthless manipulator who'll stop at nothing to ensure the right man wins: he's the archetypal party fanatic of the period, though still a young man (and chillingly played by Krzysztof Piczynski).

Pic focuses attention on two of the runners, Budny (Tadeusz Bradecki) wants to win because his father has been imprisoned by the regime, though innocent: Budny has written a letter he wants to hand to the President during the prize-giving. Stolar (Jaroslaw Kopaczewski), on the other hand, is a shameless opportunist; he's not a Party member, and is first seen hopping aboard a train without buying a ticket, then puffing a cigarette in a nonsmoking compartment. He's cheerfully ignorant as to Communist beliefs (he hardly knows who Karl Marx is) and bluffs his way into the race seeking the prize — and perhaps a little sex from one of the eager young Party members.

Stolar very quickly sabotages the guy who's been handpicked to win, by the simple process of stealing one of his special running shoes. Though he and Budny quarrel, he lets the latter win, not because he believes in his cause, but more as a cheerful gesture of defiance to the authorities. Ultimate irony is that Budny, the race-winner, isn't allowed anywhere near the President: his background has been discovered, and Piczynski shamelessly and instantly rewrites history, allowing the amazed runnerup to collect the winner's prize.

Strong stuff, and no wonder the film's been under wraps for six years. It's beautifully made, with excellent performances (especially Piczynski and Kopaczewski as the devil-may-care Stolar) and very strong direction from Domaradzki, who adds nothing extraneous and never allows the tension to drop. Indeed, the film could work with audiences not at all attuned to the riveting behind-the-scenes political

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